R E P O R T R E S U M E S

ED 020 232 UD 005 662

OUR DEMORALIZING SLUM SCHOOLS.

BY- VONTRESS, CLEMMONT E.

PUB DATE NOV 63

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.25 HC-$0.32 6P.

DESCRIPTORS- *SLUM SCHOOLS, *NEGRO STUDENTS, *PARENT SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP, *NEGRO TEACHERS, *PRINCIPALS, TEACHER MORALE, SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT, NEGROES, SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION, MIDDLE CLASS NORM,

THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES SOME OF THE EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES IN GHETTO SCHOOLS AND THE SUBSEQUENT DEMORALIZATION OF MANY PERSONS WHO ARE ASSOCIATED WITH THEM. NEGRO PARENTS RESENT THE CRITICISM THAT THEY ARE INDIFFERENT TO EDUCATION AND THE SCHOOLS. HOWEVER, THIS CRITICISM MIGHT BE UNJUST BECAUSE THIS APPEARANCE OF INDIFFERENCE OFTEN STEMS FROM THEIR ALIENATION AND POVERTY-RIDDEN POWERLESSNESS WITHIN A MIDDLE-CLASS EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM. NEGRO TEACHERS HAVE A LOW MORALE BECAUSE THEY ARE USUALLY "SHUTTLED" TO PREDOMINANTLY NEGRO SCHOOLS OR BECAUSE TEACHING IS THE ONLY WHITE-COLLAR JOB AVAILABLE TO THEM. NEGRO PRINCIPALS ARE ALSO DEMORALIZED BECAUSE THEY MUST SATISFY THE SOMETIMES CONFLICTING DEMANDS OF A WHITE SUPERINTENDENT AND NEGRO TEACHERS. FINALLY, THE SLUM SCHOOL STUDENTS THEMSELVES ARE VICTIMIZED BY THE MIDDLE-CLASS EXPECTATIONS WHICH THEY CANNOT MEET. INCREASED COMMUNITY CONTACT AND SUPPORT, INCENTIVE PAY FOR SLUM SCHOOL TEACHERS, MORE GUIDANCE COUNSELORS, AND A REEXAMINATION OF THE CURRICULUM ARE AMONG THE CHANGES RECOMMENDED FOR EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN THE "PHI DELTA KAPPAN," VOLUME 45, NUMBER 2, NOVEMBER 1963. (LB)

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ED 005 662

PHI DELTA KAPPAN

JOURNAL OF PHI DELTA KAPPA, PROFESSIONAL FRATERNITY FOR MEN IN EDUCATION

The PHI DELTA KAPPAN *solicits and publishes articles designed to advance thinking in the fields of educational research, service, and leadership. The point of view expressed in an article may support or oppose positions taken by Phi Delta Kappa as an organization.*

In this November 1963 issue

	Page
Editorial, *Laying Out New Routes to Adulthood*	69
Issues in Educating the Culturally Disadvantaged, *Bernard A. Kaplan*	70
Dissatisfactions in Teaching the CD Child, *Patrick J. Groff*	76
Our Demoralizing Slum Schools, *Clemmont E. Vontress*	77
The Teacher, the Middle Class, the Lower Class, *Samuel Tenenbaum*	82
Alienated Youth Here and Abroad, *William C. Kvaraceus*	87
Educating Culturally Deprived Youth in Urban Centers, *Frederick Shaw*	91
Acceleration for the Overage Potential Dropout?, *Gordon L. Chamberlin* with *Calvin D. Catterall*	98
A Second Look at "The Emerging High School Curriculum," *Harold Spears*	101
"Schools for the Sixties"	107
Scraps from a Teacher's Notebook, *Don Robinson*	110
Keeping Abreast in Research, *William G. Land*, Guest Editor	111
Books for Leaders	
NEW DIMENSIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS, Stanley Elam, editor. Reviewed by *John H. Fischer*	113
THE COMING WORLD TRANSFORMATION, Ferdinand Lundberg. Reviewed by *Morris R. Lewenstein*	115
TEEN-AGE TYRANNY, Fred and Grace Hechinger. Reviewed by *Joseph M. Cronin*	115
ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM IN AMERICAN LIFE, Richard Hofstadter. Reviewed by *Raymond H. Muessig*	116
Keeping Abreast in Education	118
S-R Bonds	120
It Can't Happen Here?, *A. J. Fiorino*	Inside Back Cover

VOLUME XLV • NUMBER 2 • Copyright 1963, by Phi Delta Kappa, Inc.

Entered as second-class matter at the post office at Spencer, Indiana, under the Act of August 24, 1912. ☆ Published monthly, October through June, by Phi Delta Kappa, Inc., at Spencer, Indiana. Acceptance for mailing at a special rate of postage is provided for in the Act of February 28, 1925. ☆ Subscription rate, $4.00 per year. Single copies, while available, 50 cents each, from the Bloomington Office. ☆ Listed in *Education Index*, published by the H. W. Wilson Company, New York, N. Y. Available on microfilm through University Microfilm, Inc., Ann Arbor, Mich. ☆ EDITORIAL OFFICE: Phi Delta Kappa, Eighth St. and Union Ave., Bloomington, Indiana. ☆ Member, Educational Press Association of America.

Address all communications, purchase orders, and address changes to the Business Manager, PHI DELTA KAPPAN, Eighth St. and Union Ave., Bloomington, Indiana. Postmaster: Send Form 3579 to PHI DELTA KAPPAN, Eighth St. and Union Ave., Bloomington, Indiana.

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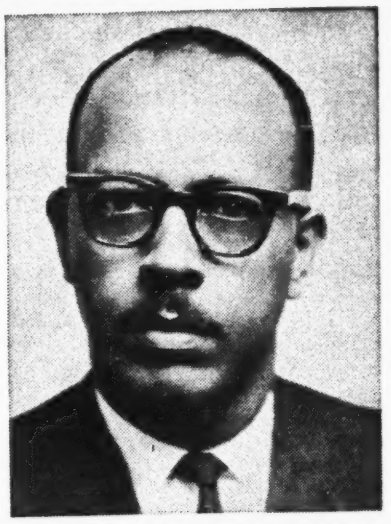
Combining research and experience, the guidance director of a large all-Negro high school writes frankly of the numbing difficulties facing Negro parents, teachers, principals, and students in the Northern inner-city.

Do we want more than make-believe education for these slum children, who eventually become wards of the state? If so, Mr. Vontress has a prescription for progress.



THE AUTHOR

Our Demoralizing Slum Schools

By CLEMMONT E. VONTRESS

A FED-UP big-city school teacher resigned with this comment: "In public schools today the teacher is afraid of the principal; the principal is afraid of the superintendent; the superintendent is afraid of the school board; the board is afraid of the parents; the parents are afraid of the children; and the children are afraid of nobody."

Such a reaction, although tinged with humor, incisively describes one aspect of the much talked-about explosive social situations which swell in inner-cities. While many social institutions are subjected to critical analysis because of these potentially dangerous conditions, the severest scrutiny and the sharpest attack is reserved for the school. Perhaps this is because the school has for so many years been thought of as the panacea institution of a troubled society struggling to realize democracy for all its citizens. Not wishing to appear impotent as a social agency, it has attempted to be all things to all people. Lately, however, educators have gained new insights into what the school can and cannot do. They realize that no school system can overcome single-handedly the social, cultural, and economic handicaps under which many children live in their non-school hours.

AD 005 662

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The retreat of whites from decaying city cores to segregated suburbs has become a salient social phenomenon. This exodus from the Negro-occupied inner-city has reached unbelievable proportions and no abatement is in sight. The annual white overflow from New York is 50,000; from Chicago, 15,000; and from Cleveland, 3,000.[1] As whites scamper, waves of Southern, country-bred Negroes move in. In 1895, Booker T. Washington revealed in his famous "Cast Down Your Buckets Where You Are" speech that one-third of the population of the South was Negro. Today, 43.5 per cent of the country's 18,871,831 Negroes live outside the original Confederacy states.[2] Negro population density in major Northern cities is four times that of whites. Detroit is 28.9 per cent Negro; Chicago, 22.9 per cent; and Washington, D. C., 53.9 per cent.[3] Some observers predict that by 1970 over one-half of all Negroes will live outside the South.

The Negro's presence in Northern urban areas has brought heretofore unknown racial problems to many cities. His "most visible racial traits which force themselves spontaneously upon one's attention"[4] and his un-city ways[5] have resulted in na-

[1] Erwin Knoll, "The Truth About Desegregation in the Washington, D. C., Public Schools," *The Journal of Negro Education* 28:92-113, No. 2, Spring, 1959.
[2] G. Roberts, Jr., "Negro Education for What?," *New York Times Magazine,* November 19, 1961, p. 26.
[3] See Clemmont E. Vontress, "Patterns of Segregation and Discrimination: Contributing Factors to Crime Among Negroes," *The Journal of Negro Education* 31:108-116, No. 2, Spring, 1962.
[4] Pitirim A. Sorokin, *Society, Culture, and Personality: Their Structure and Dynamics.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947, p. 183.
[5] Knoll, *op. cit.*

tionwide attention and increased prejudice. Full integration into American society is still remote. Every small advance in one area is offset by a retreat in another. Segregation by race is giving away to segregation by economic class. Legalistically, advances have been made; economically, more severe pressures and restrictions for the vast majority of Negroes are apparent. Automation, calling for technically trained workers, now excludes most poorly educated, unskilled Negro workers from the ranks of the employed. Since unemployed parents are in no position to assist their children in furthering their education, a degrading, self-perpetuating cycle of poverty sets in. Although laws may not prohibit a Negro from entering certain places of business, money—that is, the lack of it—will. For the vast majority of Negroes, equality will be realized only when they can compete economically. Successful job competition depends on education. Thus, finding ways to keep Negro youngsters in school is just as urgent as passing laws to "open doors" through which only the employed pass. Unless Negro children stay in school, the poverty-stricken, crime-riddled inner-city will remain the unhappy staging center for black DP's destined for a life of misery and shame.

In spite of steps toward school integration, the majority of Negro children will continue to attend all-Negro schools located in all-Negro neighborhoods.[6] These schools serve the cramped victims of residential segregation. Overcrowded all-Negro areas constitute cultural Siberias, stifling educational initiative. In general, the conditions under which Negro children are expected to receive an "equal" education are demoralizing to parents, teachers, and administrators, not to mention the children themselves.

Demoralized Parents

Criticism of the apparent indifference of Negro parents toward education and the public schools is demoralizing to those criticized. Educators lament that homes are not measuring up to their original responsibility. Parents and children who are seldom at home at the same time have become strangers. Home has become a rest-stop where family members fill up, rest up, clean up, and are off again. Mothers and fathers are remiss in disciplining their children and in encouraging them to study. This analysis of the home situation, although accurate in many cases, is unfortunate, for it seemingly absolves schools of further responsibility. Further, in failing to delimit the problem, it distorts the truth. Middle-class homes whose goals and aspirations are compatible with those of middle-class oriented schools have not abdicated their responsibility, for the most part. Urban-suburban population shifts have created socio-racial stratifications which now force into bold relief thousands of victimized lower-class Negroes who, because of continued psychological isolation from the dominant group, are cultural strangers.

In general, lower socio-economic families are characterized by material deprivation and low standards of conduct. Although they are many-generation Americans, their culture is not the dominant culture; it is lacking in stimulating content, for they have suffered their outsider status so long in so many ways. High proportions of their children began school with little on which to build a good education.[7] Language differences and the verbal problems children experience can be illustrated by the second-grader who dejectedly reported, "Ma, I ain't going to school any more."

"Why not?" inquired her mother.

"Cause it ain't no use. I can't never learn to spell. The teacher keeps changing the words on me all the time."

Lack of familiarity with the language of the school and its textbooks is handicapping to slum children. In this respect the child is not unlike his parents, who also find it difficult to understand and communicate with those who seek to change their offspring. Teachers, both Negro and white, represent another culture. They dress differently, talk differently, think differently, and appreciate differently. Negro parents come to look upon them as partially responsible for their hunger, pain, and entrapment in the ghetto. They are especially suspicious and critical of Negro teachers, who they feel are in cahoots with whites seeking to further confuse, deny, and suppress them.

It should not be supposed, however, that all slum parents are alike. Some are victims of what Galbraith[8] calls "case poverty." They are too lazy, drunk, or mentally deficient to care what happens to their children. Demoralized and frustrated out of debauchery or ignorance, they are quick to blame anyone but themselves for their unfortunate situation. Often looking upon their children as unanticipated although appreciated commodities, they may connive to keep them out of school to help "keep the family going." On the other hand, parents who are victims of "insular poverty" are cognizant of what is happening to them; but they are powerless to combat the forces that confuse and ensnare their lives.[9] In-

[6] Loren Miller, "Home, Sweet Segregated Home," *The Journal of Negro Education* 28:142-144, No. 2, Spring, 1959.

[7] Robert W. Smuts, "The Negro Community and the Development of Negro Potential," *The Journal of Negro Education* 26:456-465, No. 4, Fall, 1957.

[8] John K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1958, p. 325.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 326.

deed, it would be a shock to some of the whites who criticize the conditions in which many Negroes live to find out that the people most dissatisfied with slum conditions are the people who live in them, who are entombed in ghettos in a caste of pigmentation. Parents representative of this group try to provide for their brood but are powerless to overcome the negative forces operating against them. Women without husbands work long, hard, monotonous hours to afford bare necessities for their offspring. They would like to be more active in the PTA, but their lack of time and energy deny them the opportunity. Often their status in society results in a lack of appreciation for middle-class values, including education. Thus they feel little allegiance to the school and have little faith in what it can do for their children, since it has meant so little in their own lives.

Why Negro Teacher Morale Is Low

Added to the educational impotence of slum schools is the demoralization of many teachers who staff them. In major Northern cities, most Negro teachers, regardless of qualifications, are shuttled off to teach in ghetto schools. Denied an opportunity to come in contact with the full range of learning abilities, many of them become tired, discouraged, and disgruntled.[10] To them school is not an enthusiastic learning center where everybody is academically alert, where people desire to learn something now because it is worth knowing. Instead, it is a place where a major part of the teacher's time must be devoted to maintaining discipline among children who never before have known it. Thus it is often felt that years of excellent preparation go for naught.

There are other reasons why the morale of Negro teachers is often low. Many of them did not plan to teach in the first place; they were forced by discrimination into this traditional Negro white-collar job.[11] Through their education and associations many have become psychologically "white" and are repelled by having to work and rear their children in segregated communities. In many cases, they send their own children to other schools, because of the obvious deficiencies of the schools in which they teach or because they fear the influences of lower-class children on their own. Further, Negro teachers are frequently very sensitive to and critical of their Negro administrators who must play "both ends" (kow-towing to white superiors while appeasing and engineering co-workers) to insure the smooth operation of the school.

In general, Negro teachers appear to be ambivalent toward all-Negro schools. Many express disappointment over the performance of their students. Others, becoming defensive of their schools, keep from students and parents the fact that all-Negro schools are inferior to those where white children go. Holding their white counterparts in high esteem, they often feel that it is prestigeful to teach in predominantly white schools.[12] Few, however, leave the comfort and security of their own race even when the opportunity is available.

The challenges of slum schools call for better teaching. "Better teaching" implies enthusiasm and willingness to experiment and to grow on the part of the teacher. If Negro children continue to receive an inferior education in inner-city schools, it is not because Negro teachers do not measure up to white teachers, as Carmichael[13] boldly stated in 1956; rather, it is because shuttled-off teachers are discouraged and disgusted with the practice of assigning Negro teachers to all-Negro or predominantly Negro schools. Although they have not quit on the job, they are seriously demoralized. Integrating teachers now may help to arrest this creeping lethargy. The interests and attitudes of white and Negro teachers can be shared. The elimination of this ethnic educational in-breeding on the faculty level should also revive interest in learning on the part of students. They will see integration in action and may soon come to rededicate themselves to striving for achievement in spite of their race.

The Negro Principal: Man in a Trap

To assume that the principal of the slum school is less demoralized than parents and teachers is to be unaware of the facts. The Negro principal must respond to the expectations of the superintendent, who is generally white, and to his teachers, who are usually Negro. This dual responsibility creates an ethnic dilemma for him. If he responds to the expectations of the superintendent and neglects those of his co-workers, he may incur severe criticism from his teachers and the wider community as well, since teachers assume many roles outside the classroom.

The responsibility entrapment causes many top-level administrators to exculpate themselves while giving pupils and parents a false impression of what they are getting for their money.[14] Fearful

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[10] Martin Mayer, "How Alive Is Your High School?" *Seventeen* 22:120-3, February, 1963.

[11] Omar Carmichael, "Is Voluntary Integration the Answer?," *U. S. News and World Report* 4:46-50, October, 1956.

[12] Willard E. Gandy, "Implications for Integration for the Southern Teacher," *The Journal of Negro Education* 31:191-197, No. 2, Spring, 1962.

[13] Carmichael, *op. cit.*

[14] L. W. Jones, "Social Unreadiness of Negro Youth," *Saturday Review* 45:81-83, October, 1962.

of criticism from superiors, Negro school administrators are often more interested in presenting a "good front" than they are in ascertaining the real capabilities of their students and teachers.[15] This, in part, may be why slum schools have become harbors of incompetent teachers and prisons for inept students. Principals often stock-pile passionate and vituperative replies to hurl at those who imply that their students do not measure up.[16] They thus dilly-dally away precious psychological time and expend vital energy defending "Negro Education," thereby falling into a snare set by the white power structure seeking to contain the Negro student in separate schools.

Especially frustrating to the Negro principal is the often ill-defined role of the white subject-matter supervisors who work within the school, but who are under direct supervision of the superintendent. While this ambiguous situation is disconcerting to most principals, it is especially obnoxious to the Negro principal, who may feel surrounded by white spies who may cost him his job. To say that the principal of an all-Negro slum school has a difficult job is to put it mildly.

The Position of the Student

Let us now look for a moment at the position of the student. The typical slum school, although located in the inner-city, is still middle-class oriented. Its goals are therefore antithetical to the focal concerns of the youth it serves. Having to meet the expectations of this educational institution for over one-half of their waking hours is frequently intolerable. Their own poverty and the resultant necessity to work part-time, their lack of privacy at home, and the remoteness of school-set goals prevent them from concentrating on study. The longer they stay in school the more discouraged they become. Many who do not become truant merely sit out their lessons, stolidly awaiting the drone of the bell and their release from suffering. Others, finding self-restraint no longer possible, express themselves in the only way they know how—through toughness, smartness, and excitement, thereby envoking immediate condemnation from their captors.

Students who are able to meet the expectations of the school are often unwilling to put forth the effort, for they are aware that an education is likely to be useless. Even with a college education, they may be forced to drive municipal buses, bell-hop, wait tables, or work in post offices. Seeing no escape from the racial trap, they look forward not to more education but to adult work and marriage.

[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*

Students who want more education may recognize that the academic odds are against them. Their unfamiliarity with the official language in which most tests are written is a barrier to qualifying for competitive college scholarships, most of which are based on test scores. It was reported that in 1956 not a single Negro was among the 5,000 or so winners or runners-up in the National Merit Scholarship Qualifying Test.[17] Although a great deal of work has been done to indicate the cultural bias of tests, this method of determining who shall get college scholarships is likely to continue for some time.

The explosive character of the inner-city situation is easy to see. Youngsters no longer able to withstand the confinement of classrooms are roving the streets night and day looking for their kind of excitement—crime and destruction. To them, nothing is inviolable. Incapable of achieving in school and unsuccessful in finding work, wandering dropouts often live by the code, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Stealing, destroying, assaulting, they do not or cannot conform to the expectations of the dominant society.

Citizens, associating idleness with norm-violating behavior, have become concerned over the alarmingly high dropout rates among teen-agers. Parents, teachers, and community leaders often hurl accusations and recriminations at each other. Although disagreement abounds on the dropout question, there is a general consensus that since youngsters without a high-school diploma are locked out of the labor market, the best place for them is in school, even though many cannot read or write well enough to achieve a modicum of success. If they are different as a result of their impoverished background, they should be treated differently, some propose. Advocates of this approach say that vocational training programs designed to meet the employment opportunities in the community should be provided.[18] However, this viewpoint has come under attack by educators who view automation with increasing alarm. They maintain that traditional vocational training will serve neither the interests of the economy nor the Negro. Unskilled and semi-skilled workers are being replaced rapidly by machines. Moreover, to provide a special kind of education for minority youth is to make more rigid the caste which they and their parents have known for so long. In the American society, integration means competition, and successful competition requires equal education. Without it, true equality in other areas will never be realized.

[17] Stanley E. Ballinger, "Of Testing and Its Tyranny," *Phi Delta Kappan* 44:176-180, No. 4, January, 1963.
[18] James B. Conant, "False Education for Many Slum Children?" *Ladies' Home Journal*, 79:6, January, 1962.

MUCH TO BE DONE—QUICKLY

"IF we intend to do more than continue the make-believe of educating countless slum children who will eventually become wards of the state, much has to be done and done quickly. The slum community must be mobilized to exert whatever resources may be there. Parents must be taught to demand quality education. This means demanding quality teachers, administrators, and school board members. To compensate for the poor state of affairs in slum schools, more money must be spent on them than on schools which serve middle-class communities. Teachers should be given incentive pay for teaching in slum schools. How else are quality teachers to be kept in run-down inner-city schools?

At the school level, teachers and administrators must work to win back alienated parents, who have come to associate schools with the "they" in their lives, the people who somehow determine what happens to them. If parents will not come to school—and there is some reason to believe that they will not—the school must go to them. "Education Appreciation" workshops may be set up in neighborhood churches, regardless of denomination or the state of repair of the church. The main thing is to make contact and gain the psychological leverage for social action. Parents must learn that education is the salvation for themselves and for their children.

Negro educators who continue to defend "Negro Education" should examine their positions carefully. Would it not be more fruitful to stand up for quality education instead? Negro education teeters on excuses; quality education competes on equality.

The slum school curriculum needs re-examination. Special attention must be given to the teaching of reading, since it is impossible to learn without being able to read. All teachers must become teachers of reading.

Since the slum child's world has been devoid of books, the whole school must become a library. Every classroom should have its own library, not locked in clear-glass bookcases but readily available on open shelves. Children must be able to find books on any subject which is of even the slightest interest to them.

An examination of the curriculum is incomplete until teachers have taken a look at themselves. The importance of this is realized if it is accepted that the Negro child needs to develop a sense of identity, a pride in being Negro, in being black. If the teacher himself is anxious about being Negro, he is an ineffective purveyor of faith, courage, and pride in being Negro. The school curriculum must help the child discover who he is and what he is. A course in Negro history may be effective in helping the student acquire a historical frame of reference. A course in the psychology of adjustment may be an immediate way to heal wounded personalities, bleeding from self-pity, shame, and a lack of courage to achieve.

Guidance counselors are needed in greater numbers in slum schools. If the counselor-student ratio in the average middle-class school is 1:300, it should be 1:150 in the slum school. The Negro child is alienated from himself, from the school, and from those who remind him of himself. He needs to find identity in a white world. Coming from predominantly matriarchial homes, Negro boys and girls grow from the experience of a counseling relationship.

There are many pressing social needs indeed, but none seems nearly so important as searching for ways to give slum boys and girls a reason for staying in school.

Dropout Study in Syracuse Schools

➢ Of the 565 dropouts from Syracuse schools in 1959-60, 61 per cent had IQ scores of 90 or above. Thirty per cent of the boys and 24 per cent of the girls had scores of 100 or better. But 90 per cent of the boys and 70 per cent of the girls were retarded at least a year in their grade placement. Twenty-seven per cent of the boys and 11 per cent of the girls had court delinquency records prior to age 16. The total dropout rate was 5.4 per cent. Fifty-five per cent were boys. The largest number dropped out during the eleventh grade. These and other data are reported in *The School Dropout Problem: Syracuse*, available for 50¢ from the Syracuse Univ. Youth Development Center, 404 Comstock, Syracuse 10, N.Y.

Allport: Racial Demonstrations Healthy

➢ Racial demonstrations in America are basically a sign of good national emotional health, psychologist Gordon Allport told the American Psychological Association recently. Negroes have seen their goal and are "running for home," Dr. Allport said, explaining that "running for home" is a popular expression of the psychological concept known as the "goal gradient." According to this theory, the subject in an experiment speeds up when approaching his goal. Increased racial demonstrations represent this "stepping on the accelerator" in the reach for the goal of making color irrelevant. There must be clear focus on next steps and how to implement them, he said, in order to minimize the danger of riots and violence.